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HIDDEN HOUSE

BY

AMÉLIE RIVES



HIDDEN HOUSE

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"I AM ROBINA ! ROBINA ! LOOK !"

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HIDDEN HOUSE

By

AMÉLIE RIVES

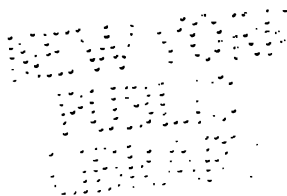
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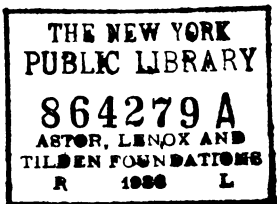
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WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY
GAYLE PORTER HOSKINS



PHILADELPHIA & LONDON
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY

1912



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PUBLISHED MARCH, 1912



PRINTED BY J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
AT THE WASHINGTON SQUARE PRESS
PHILADELPHIA, U.S.A.

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C.

To
MY DEAR FRIEND AND COUSIN
HELEN MARTIN
WITH DEEP LOVE

PART FIRST

HIDDEN HOUSE

I.

THERE is no true story that is quite old as I reason, nor is there any such that is quite new, but each happening takes its bent and colour from the man's personality to whom it comes and something also from the times in which he lives.

To me in those days, while I was acting the events which I am about to set down, it seemed as if no other man could have known the like, no, nor lived through them and his brain not be turned to chaff. But I am sound enough in mind and body, and it is all many years ago.

That they set their mark upon me, so that the familiar face of life has looked gaunt and eldritch to me ever since, is no

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island of perception; cutting me off from others maybe, but solving me to myself—isolating, yet contenting me.

I felt that I must get away from the hubbub of discussion for a period, at least. I was hungry for solitude with a great hunger which I have no words to express,—for literal, physical solitude, in some remote place, where I could read and ponder and come to grips with myself as it were, beyond all possibility of intrusion.

Sheer distraction of spirit made me voice this desire one day to an old and dear friend of my mother—a Virginian, who had married her youngest sister, and spent several months of the year in our home on the Massachusetts coast.

He looked at me in silence for some moments, pushed out a considering lower lip, and then said kindly:

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“ Well, lad, I know the place for you. And I think you’ve diagnosed your own case pretty well for a youth. To be alone and fight it out with God’s help. Do I take you correctly? ”

I told him “ yes ” and thanked him.

So he agreed to explain all that was necessary to my mother (my father had died when I was a child), and I set off for the hills of Virginia with full directions from him, and a letter for the Scotch gentleman, a Mr. Alexander Jardine, with whom I was to lodge. He had also sent another letter before me, to prepare my host and his granddaughter for my coming.

Mr. Nelson explained to me that although he had lodged at Mr. Jardine’s once or twice on shooting expeditions, he was not at all intimately acquainted with the old gentleman; that the household was, in truth, a somewhat strange one, consisting

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only of Mr. Jardine, his two grand-daughters alternately, and an old negress who was a deaf mute.

They were poor and took lodgers occasionally, when such could be found as would not be discontent with their plain fare and way of living. Mr. Jardine was rapidly lapsing toward his second childhood, my friend thought, and Moina must now be a girl of about twenty. She was grave and quiet and spoke little. Her twin-sister Robina resembled her in feature, but seemed, as her grandfather put it, "daft-like," and sang and chattered to herself and was nearly always without-doors when at home. It appeared that the sisters took turns in caring for their grandfather, and when one was in charge, the other stayed with an aunt who lived somewhere in the further valley.

All that I heard of this place suited my

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humour to a nicety. Even the deaf-muteness of the old black did but add to my sense of forthcoming seclusion. I longed to be folded from all that I had hitherto known, in the free wildness of those Virginia mountains, and I looked forward with no more anxiety to the chatterings and pipings of Robina than I would have felt in regard to a red-bird. That she chattered only to herself, as a habit, was the essential thing.

II.

It was on an afternoon of mid-October that I alighted at the little highland stand from which a rough road led to the mountains. My luggage had been sent on two days previous, by Mr. Nelson's advice, and was already at the Jardines'—carried there by pack-mules, the station-master informed me. I made a bargain with the driver of an ox-cart, whose farm lay in that direction, and we were soon jolting towards the wooded crests. I had fancied, like most Northerners, that Virginia would be always mild, even in winter, and the clear, shining cold of the day astonished me. There was no wind, but as evening drew on, the range before us darkened into the grim blue of metal, and beyond the sky rose like a wall of ice through which shone a steady, sullen glare, as of some vast conflagration far away.

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My companion asked, among many other things, where I was going, and when I told him to Hidden House (so the Jardine place was called), he pursed his lips as if to whistle, then thought better of it, and only gave me a round stare.

"Ben there before?" he asked at last.

"No," I answered. "Why?"

The same caution that had led him to check his whistle showed in his reply.

"Oh, nothin' partic'lar. It's mighty far up in the mountains. Goin' to walk it, when I set you down?"

"Certainly. If you'll point out the road."

This time he did whistle.

" 'Road '!" he echoed me. "They ain't nothin' but sheep-tracks leads up to *that* place,—leastways, from this valley."

"Well," said I, "then I'll follow a sheep-track."

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He was silent after this, but from time to time gave me sly glances of such an almost awed curiosity, that I became as curious myself to know what was in his mind.

I could get nothing definite from him, however, even by the subtlest methods. The only piece of information that I succeeded in obtaining was when I asked him how they managed to get provisions if there were no road to the place.

"They tells as how a old crazy, dumb nigger goes down to the other valley with a big basket strapped to her back, like a beast of burden," he answered. "But I don't know nothin' 'bout it. Folks is always talkin'."

And from this moment till we came to the foot of Thunder Mountain, our destination, he had no more to say on the subject.

However, he was at great pains to set

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me on the right way, and showed a marked kindness in the doing of it. He even accompanied me for a short distance into the forest, which was here of virgin growth, describing certain trees and landmarks by which I could guide myself, higher up, and telling me to keep always rather to the right than to the left, as he understood, from what folks said, that Hidden House (he always called it "that place") lay to the right of the main peak. His whole manner was so death-beddish and solemn that a person of frayed nerves might well have been rasped by it, but it only added to my zest for the unusual. Already my mind was answering the new stimulus, and my blood sang as it had not done since I was a little lad with a horrid, yet pleasing, belief in ghosts.

"Well, good luck to you," he said at last, giving my hand a hearty wring, but

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his tone implied that there was little, if any, of that commodity to be hoped for where I am going.

I managed to keep a grave air while thanking him, and started off up the mountain at a good pace.

After about an hour's steady climbing, I came out of the forest upon a cheek of clearing, shaggy with broom and the stalks of an old maize-crop. Below this point, the hills fell away sharply, and I could look out over the valley from which I had come. Dark and monotonous, it spread like a brooding sea to the very horizon, and one felt rather than saw the pervading violet of its sad shadow. But the sky toward which I was going still shone with the light-red, quivering hue of winter sunset. A huge cloud had reared itself in the south-west half-way to the zenith, and from beyond this darkling shape there spread a

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monstrous wheel of light, whose hub was the fiery sun-disk. I let my fancy spin for a moment, and saw that towering cloud-form as the Prince of the Power of the Air, with titan hands on the spokes of light, steering the earth as it had been a ship, through the dark winds of space, to its ultimate and unimaginable port. Indeed, I felt for a moment giddy with this fantasy, and the stable hill-side seemed to rock with me. Then I turned and hurried on, for I had no mind to be caught by night in these wildnesses.

A rude stone boundary-wall guided me for a little through the forest into which the path again led me, but shortly I came out upon another clearing. From thence I looked across a deep hollow to the second peak of the mountain of which I had been told, and saw, far up on its wrinkled haunch, a long, low house of grey stone,

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crouching close, as for shelter. From its central chimney rose a shaft of light blue smoke, that as it reached the upper air took on a reddish hue with the last sunbeams. I went forward now, almost at a trot, for this singular dwelling could be no other than Hidden House. The next instant I found how apt was its name, for a slight turn hid it completely from me, nor did I glimpse it again until I had climbed another rise and saw a long, black, vaulted aisle of junipers, or red-heart cedars, as they are called thereabouts, mounting the hill before me. Such wild grotesques did these sombre trees draw against the smouldering west, that it seemed as though some great sentence of magic import was traced along the sky for him who had wit to profit by. Through this forbidding and solemn avenue I walked until the house was once more in sight. Another turn

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brought me almost to the right wing, and quite to the sunken gate of a little graveyard, cushioned thick with periwinkle. The small white stones gleamed like the ghosts of sickly children through the twilight. There must have been a score of them. I left them gladly for the ruddy square that broke the walls of the dark house.

Mounting the low porch, with its doric columns, I looked in at the unshuttered window and thus saw Moina Jardine, for the first time, kneeling upon the hearthstone of Hidden House. I knew that it was Moina, and not Robina, from the clear quietude of her face, and the sweet gravity with which her dark hair was parted and smoothed along her temples. Yet, in spite of its pretty ordering, which no blackbird's breast could have bettered, the fire-light showed me a soft dent here and there in its

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glossy sweep, that hinted how joyously it would have waved and curled about that wide brow if only it had been free. And there seemed to me something intimately sad and touching in the repression of that young hair, which was matched by the look on the clear face that it framed. I think that I loved Moina from the very moment that this fancy came to me. Nay, I know that I did. And life holds no starker fact than this, that a man's heart may bear two loves at once, just as a woman may bear twin children. When the mother will tell you with frankness which of these two is dearer, the lover will confess the like to his own soul,—not till then. But this thing I will tell, that such a divided heart splits the life of him who hath it,—and halves his very soul. Can eternity mend such a break as that? And is not eternity the kernel of this Now? You perceive, O Soul,

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that I am still asking questions which not I nor any man can answer. Yet questions, even though there be no answers, are the only bread by which we nourish a life other than the beasts.

I have drifted a far way off from Moina as she knelt that evening on the hearthstone of Hidden House.

She was feeding the newly-laid fire of hickory logs with what I at first most foolishly took to be some sort of candles. Gazing closer, I saw that they were the white cobs from which the maize had been shelled, and which, I learned afterwards, she used for kindling from a very necessary economy. They burned charmingly, running over with reddish sparkles when they first caught, and gradually flaring into a bright, gem-like mass.

I am glad that I have never seen nor ever shall see any other besides Moina

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kindle a fire in this pretty fashion. It is a picture unique and clear, in which no other mixes. How often I helped her in latter days, and how merry we made as to whose kindling caught quicker and burned brighter! These are the trifles that memory stabs our nerves with when we have grown callous to her cudgellings.

As soon as I could draw my eyes from Moina in her brown frock and blue kerchief, with the firelight under her white chin, I looked about the room, and saw that it was all panelled in some dark wood, the ceiling low and home-like, and the floor, which was waxed and lay unevenly like a wind-blown carpet, spread with home-made rugs of blue and yellow. The window curtains of plain yellowish dye were, fortunately for me, still undrawn. There were old corner cupboards and a chest of drawers, on which stood pewter

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jugs and platters and some pieces of glazed ware. Two spinning-wheels, one very large, one small for flax, were set against the wall.

By leaning further out from the porch, I could see part of the left side of the room, and a splendid-looking old man in a great chair, with a plaid over his knees, and a tallow candle under a glass shade at his elbow. His eyebrows were immense and black as jet; his eyes, as well as I could judge in the mingled fire-and-candle light, a bright, wild blue. His hair rose about his great head like a rime of hoar-frost. In one hand he held a stitched book of yellowish paper, and seemed to be reading verses from it, either aloud or to himself (I could not hear for the lowered glass), and beating time with his long forefinger. A little mongrel, with wiry hair, sat upright between his knees, gazing at the fire,

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and blinking every now and then as the waving forefinger came near him. The reader must of course be Mr. Alexander Jardine, but I could see no signs of senility in that vehement face, with its shrewd half-smile and passionately alive, light-blue eyes.

I gazed on until Moina turned and seemed to look straight at me through the uncurtained window, compelled, most likely, by that force in the human eye which no man ever has or ever will explain, but which all have experienced.

The next moment I knocked at the door.

III.

MOINA herself came to open it, and shortly I was part of that warm, home-like scene on which I had been gazing so absorbedly from outside. I was invited to a chair by the old gentleman, who began to question me with interest regarding Mr. Nelson, while "Tyke" descended, and after a snuffing and thorough examination of my boots, laid his mustachioed nose upon my knee, and quivered his frazzled tail in sign of amity.

"'Tyke' has ta'en to ye, I see," observed Mr. Jardine, smiling. "Nae such diagnoscian o' human nature in the world as a dog, Mr. Marston. Ye should take pride in it."

"I do indeed," said I, and caressed "Tyke," who lapped my fingers and wiped his eyes upon my knee at the same time,

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in the way that dogs have of mixing affection and self-indulgence.

“ We just ca’ him ‘ Tyke,’ ” pursued Mr. Jardine, “ because ’tis the generic name for dog in Scotland, and in our opeenion he combines a’ that’s best in doghood, leaving out a bit azure in his blood.”

He gave his half-smile and leaned over to pull “ Tyke’s ” ear. He had a beautiful, great voice, and spoke with a pleasant “ burr ” and just a turn of phrase in Scots fashion, now and then. Mr. Nelson had told me that in talking with Robina he was apt to lapse into the broad, lowland speech, but that he had never heard him do so with Moina. I recalled this now, and thought that there was probably a closer sympathy between him and his other grandchild, though it seemed strange that it should be so; but age is full of these whimsies, and I dismissed the matter at that.

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We discoursed on several subjects, freely and easily, for "Tyke's" acceptance of me seemed to have quite established me in his master's good graces, and I saw no reason to alter my first impression. His talk was full of pith and scholarly "observes," as he would have called them. It was an admirable mind, shrewd yet mellow, with flashes across it now and then of an imaginative wit that licked up obscurities like a tongue of lightning. I thought him indeed a most amazing old man, and wondered whether I had not had the good fortune to utter a spiritual "sesame" where Mr. Nelson had only mentioned "wheat" or "maize." Certainly he threw wide the doors of his mind to me, whatever the cause.

Then suddenly a slight thing happened, which made me comprehend something of Mr. Nelson's opinion.

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I had handed Mr. Jardine the day's paper which I had brought with me, that he might glance at the editorial which was written on a subject that we had been discussing. He became deeply absorbed in it, and Moina, after glancing at him once or twice, came quietly behind his chair and slipped away the yellowed book of manuscript in which he had been reading when I entered.

At once, as though some conscious part of him had been filched, he began to stir restlessly, to glance sidewise, to mutter. Finally, dashing aside the paper which he held, he sprang wide-awake as it were, and, seeing the empty place on the table, where the manuscript had lain, he began striking it with his open palm, and shouting in a perfect torrent of broad Scots, which I will a little modify in the recording:

“Ye girzie, ye! Whaur hae ye put

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it? Whaur hae ye put it? Whaur hae ye put it? Ye might as weel answer soon as late, for 'twill be calling to me in its ane tongue! Ye shilpit [puny] changeling! Gie me back Robina's book! I'll no' stand it, I tell ye! It ill sets ye to lightly [belittle] her, ye wi' your dyin' dove's eyes! Wad ye peck at her crest o' fire, ye bit, songless midden-fowl, ye! If I tell Robina o't, she'll set ye in sic a fire-tailed comet o' song as ye'll burn in for a' posterity to peer at, brighter than ye'd blaze in muckle hell! Gie me Robina's book instanter! Gie't me! Gie't me! Ye . . . ye . . . porridge-hearted tepidity!"

It is perhaps needless to say that several times during this outburst I tried to leave the room, but the old man had grasped me firmly by the coat, so that, without an unseemly tussle, I could not possibly have escaped. Moina also had

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tried from the first to pacify him, bringing the manuscript quickly and striving in a dozen gentle ways to make him see that it was there again, but so immoderate was the flood of his wrath that his actual surroundings seemed hidden from him by its flying spume.

When finally he realized that the book was near him again, he snatched it as though from the jaws of fire, and nursed it to his breast. Then in a more rational tone he addressed his granddaughter:

“Why will ye no’ learn by experience?” he demanded. “Weel ye ken I gang gyte [go crazy] whene’er ye lightly Robina’s book or make way wi’ it so quiet an’ secret like.”

“Grandfather,” returned Moina in a low voice, full of love, “none knows better than you that I look on Robina as on myself.”

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And it seemed to me that her tone carried some hidden meaning too deep and sorrowful for a stranger's interpretation. But it seemed only to irritate the old man.

"Do ye so?" asked he, with a sneer that made of his rampant old beauty raw ugliness in my eyes. "A-weel, an' I dinna. An' thaur's the differ a-tween us in a barley-corn."

But the next instant he had wiped the rude look from his face with one stroke of his hand across it, and I beheld the same shrewd, composed countenance that had at first pleased me.

"You're a good lass, Moina," he said, dropping the broad Scots as suddenly as he had adopted it. "Yes, a good and a kind. Mind you don't vex me further about this book, and you and me'll can live in peace and charity till doomsday."

Moina promised that she would try to

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please him better in future, and there was something so tenderly sorrowful in the broad droop of her lowered lids as she looked down at him, that I felt the stir of tears beneath my own. She then suggested that I should follow her to my room, as supper would be laid by half-past six, and I would doubtless like to refresh myself after my long journey.

When we stood without in the hall, she turned suddenly, and, looking straight at me with her dark eyes, said softly, though not exactly in a whisper:

“Mr. Marston, I must explain for your own comfort how it was that my poor grandfather got so excited just now. Will you kindly listen?”

I began to say some stupid thing about all old people being excitable, but she stopped me with a look almost imploring.

“No, no, this is different,” she said.

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"It is just that my grandfather thinks my . . . thinks that Robina is a great genius, and gets so wrought up over her book of songs. She has written some songs, strangely enough, in the Scots dialect. . . . How that may be, I cannot tell. It will just be in the blood, I suppose. . . ."

She broke off, gazing dreamingly for a moment, then caught her thread again with a start. "It is only that he gets so wild when he speaks of Robina, that I must ask you to keep him from the subject if you can. Yes, though I seem vulgar and jealous, I must ask you that. Will you please remember, Mr. Marston? For it is different when Robina is with him in person. They . . . they seem to suit each other. . . ."

And again she paused, and that dreaming look stole into her eyes. And again she roused herself with a sort of start, like one

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waking voluntarily from encroaching sleep.

“That is all,” she then said. “Please do not encourage him to discuss her.” But the next moment she added with painful earnestness: “Indeed, you can trust me. It is not good for him. It is for him I speak.”

And when I would have reassured her, she only set my bed-room candle in my hand, pointed to an open door at the head of the low stairs, and slipped swiftly back into the living-room.

IV.

IN that quiet, secluded life far up in the splendid and austere sincerity of those aloof hills, it was not long before I began to find the fragments of what I had thought my individuality, and in sober earnest set to fitting them together into a more enduring shape. And as this new form of myself grew under my shaping thought, I came to regard it more and more in the limpid mirror of Moina's lovely personality, to look upon it, as reflected there, for any hidden flaws and misshapen outlines. She bent naturally to me from the first, as I to her. She with her clear and steadfast flame fitted as sweetly into my gloomier nature as a star into the surrounding darkness, and as lovingly I flowed about her, lighted by her, and glad that my dimness should lend her occasion for brighter shin-

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ing. I found her rarely well read for a woman, and with thoughts of her own, that gave me all the joy of a discoverer. As for her beauty both of soul and body, I could only think of Wordsworth's matchless and haunting lines composed in the Hartz forest, for surely Nature had taken Moina to herself and made a Lady of her own. I never saw her listening, in one of her soft reveries, to the great chords of the winter wind that she so loved, but I thought of the lines

And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face.

The household ways moved evenly in a pleasant monotony. There were but two servants, the negress already mentioned, and a white lad, who tended the small orchard and worked the few acres of arable land surrounding the house. He had care

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also of the two cows and one plough-horse. At the busier seasons, a younger brother came up from the valley to assist him. All this he did for a mere pittance in addition to his food and lodging.

The negress I seldom saw, although Moina told me that she was a master-worker and kept the kitchen garden as well as two men could have done. I could well believe this, for I have never seen so powerful a woman. Not only was she very tall, quite six feet I judged, as she topped me by at least an inch, but with the breadth and bone of an athlete, and a carriage of amazing dignity and grace,—that stealing, flowing gait which comes from the portage of heavy weights upon the head. I have seen her move along the hillside to the mountain stream where she did her washing, carrying a great pot of iron upon her turbaned head as though it had been an

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empty cocoanut-shell. Though her gestures were all admirable and full of meaning, as if, with her, force was a precious possession never to be wasted, her face was singularly empty. Her eyes, large, brilliant, and widely opened, might have been of varnished teak-wood like the rest of her face, which looked as though carved from that substance, and she always seemed to me like a person sleeping with open eyes and moving in her sleep. I supposed that this was due to her affliction, but its effect was unpleasant in the extreme, and I was glad that I did not have to see her often.

I found that the descent into the further valley was much easier than on the side from which I had come, and that provisions were brought from this point by the extraordinary negress, twice during the week. She was a Jamaican, Moina told me, and had been sold to her grandfather

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under the name of Mercedes, which they had shortened to "Mercy."

As they admitted me to further intimacy, I learned that Mr. Jardine had a small income which he shared with his sister, the aunt in whose home Robina and Moina lived alternately at regular intervals, and who was unmarried. Also that his pippins, being of exceptionally fine quality, and thriving well at this altitude, brought him in a considerable sum every year, and were sold regularly to a merchant who came himself to attend to their packing and transportation. When I reflected on these kind, homely confidences, and the way in which I seemed to have fallen into this full yet quiet existence, it seemed to me that three years instead of three weeks must have passed since I entered it. And when my thought went deeper and I found Moina nestled in the very

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roots of my heart, it was as though I had dwelt with her from the beginning.

We had said nothing to each other as yet, but that glory of first love is not to be hidden and will shine through the most opaque natures and light all that is commonplace around them into a fairy-like splendour, and glow reflected back upon them, from the soberest faces.

Indeed, I was so sure that I saw this sharing gleam on the countenance of Mr. Jardine, that I sought him one morning, when Moina was busy about her housework, and made a full confession of my love for her.

He listened to me in entire silence, merely moving his head in assent now and then, and saying, " Mh, . . . mh . . . " at intervals in an abstracted voice. When I had made an end of it, I almost doubted whether he had taken in one word that I

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had uttered, so profoundly absorbed was his expression. But what was my amazement, even consternation, when with a sudden splintering of his icy look into the most roguish, cunning, youthful smile that was surely ever seen on the face of age, he bent forward and, clapping a hand upon my knee, said in a loud whisper:

“Man! Wait till ye’ve seen Robina!”

I suppose that my expression must have struck him as comical, for he began to laugh consumedly, though under his breath, as it were.

“Eh, sirs! Ye’ll look more dazed-like than that, once ye’ve seen her,” he murmured at last, wiping those dancing, youthful eyes of his, which seemed as misplaced under his white hair as fire-toys on a bier.

I could not so much as force a smile in reply, and this set him off again.

“Eh, sirs! Eh, sirs!” he kept chuck-

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ling. "The chiel's at his wit's end. How to check me he doesna' ken, and sure am I that to talk wi' him about Robina has been forbid by Moina!"

This only added to my confusion and kept me dumb.

Suddenly he changed, and his face grew of a strange earnestness.

"See here, Mannie," said he, leaning forward and fixing those elf-lights of eyes upon me, "we might as weel have it out and be bye with it. Talk of Robina I will when the fit takes me, though they tied my jaw with the grave-band. For Robina is mysel' in a lookin'-glass . . . juist mysel' in a glass, and despite the Book, it's juist himsel' a man luves first an' last, an' not his neighbour, tho' 'tis a fine saying to quote, and gives deegnity to the Almighty. And 'tis not for that she's kind to me or good to me that I luve Robina." (I have

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no power to describe the contempt with which he uttered this “kind to me or good to me.”) “We juist dinna’ luv things for why they’re kind and good to us. We luv them because they’re kith an’ kin to us. All that’s kin to us we luv as we luv the life that warms us. Will a man luv water because ’tis good and kind to him, and sluices off his poisons and humours? Na; but he’ll luv whisky which is juist anither poison in his blood, but makes him burn merrily and forget how heavy is this clay!”

He struck his breast in saying these last words, as though in anger against his own body, and then went on more eagerly than ever:

“I luv Robina for that she is Robina! She takes no such care of her auld grandad as t’ither, but, Man! ’tis *her* my entrails yearn ower! I, who hae never lived, I live

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in her! All I would ha' liked to be an' dared not, she *is*, the hizzy! She luv'es herself abuve all ithers, an' she dares admit it! *Admit it!* She fair glories in it! If David danced before the Ark, Man, she dances on it. Ay, she's the desire of my shrivelled heart, she that fills up her ain heart like a plum its skin, till there's no place in it for aught else, man or angel!"

I could not have spoken for my life, it seemed to me, and even had I managed to utter some commonplace, it would have been like throwing a cork to Niagara. The torrential passion of this awesome and wonderful old man would have swept away the weightiest phrases ever framed.

He now drew forth the book of manuscript from where he had hidden it behind the cushion of his chair, and, holding it in both hands, shook it vehemently before me.

"See you this bit book?" said he. "It

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holds more in its wee breest than a whole continent of 'you's' and 'me's.' There are songs here that wad hae made Rabbie Burns cuddle in the Deil's oter [the Devil's arm-pit], might he but have fath-ered 'em! Here's all the secret thoughts that e'er you an' me hae tried to smother, alive an' laughin'. Here's the secret of all hearts writ out afore the Judge-ment Day. Here's the pride o' the eye and the lust o' life not cowerin' like bog-gles [hobgoblins] at a cross, but shining out as unshamed an' bonny as a field o' poppies! . . .

"Man! the shameless truth o't. Ay, 'tis Truth herself is here, naked as fire and no more afflicted with modesty than the flame in yon chimney! . . . An' who has done this meeracle? . . . Robina! An' who wad they stop me frae namin' ? . . . Robina! An' for who would an old man

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risk judgment an' a young man sell his soul outright if he but glimpsed her? Robina! Robina! Robina!"

I confess that his frenzy had me shaken, and that I flamed with a greedy curiosity to read if only one page of that strange manuscript. I gazed at it with new thoughts, and saw for the first time the name "Robina" dashed across its cover in a black, fierce little writing. This writing stirred me oddly. It had the personality of living things, and seemed to dance as I looked upon it. Should I ever read one of those wild poems written by the "daft-like" girl, whose very name seemed informed with an eerie vitality?

Here it was that Moina entered the room, and my cheeks flared as though I had been caught at something evil. She looked sadly enough from one to the other of our disturbed faces, then to the manu-

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script between us, and, after mending the fire and lighting the candle at her grandfather's elbow, went quietly out again. But I could not bear this. Something from her calm presence had flowed over my hot mood like a cooling breeze over one in a fit of fever, and I suddenly saw the lowness of my curiosity and the selfish weakness that had kept me from checking the old man's revelations.

I ran after her, and found her going to the well for a pitcher of fresh water against supper-time.

It was death-still, but very cold, and the great spangles of the stars shook as though they were but reflections in the dark lake of night. So brilliant were they that I could see Moina's face quite clearly, where it shone like a pearl from the foldings of her shawl.

I did not speak at first, but went

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silently with her, and, as if by a mutual consent, we leaned over the well together and saw our black reflections outlined with stars.

Then I said close to her ear:

“So I always see you.”

“How?” she asked softly.

“Set among the stars,” I answered.

But at this she put down her pitcher, and covered her face with her hands.

“Moina. . . , Moina. . . ,” I whispered, choking, and would have drawn away her hands, but she would not suffer it.

“Wait . . . ,” she pleaded, with such an agony of appeal in her low voice that I could not but obey her.

“I have something to tell you . . . when we are in the house again,” she then said.

I drew water and filled the pitcher for her, and we returned to the house as silently as we had come.

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She led me to a little room where the sewing and ironing were done, and stood before me. She was strangely white, and her eyes seemed as if they had been washed paler by many tears.

"I must tell you," she said in an even, toneless voice, not looking at me, but out at the darkened window, as though in spite of the gloom she saw beyond it, "that the time is here for me to go, and . . . Robina to come."

She breathed distressfully for an instant, then set her hand to her breast and continued: "I must warn you that you and Robina have nothing in common—that she will repel and shock you. . . . Yet you will try to be forbearing?"

Her tone was a question, and I hastened to say: "Yes, yes—I will. . . . I will indeed."

"Forbearing but not indulgent," she pursued. "Not too kind. . . . Not en-

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couraging to her humours. And what will seem to you like madness. . . . Never, never must you mention my name to her."

The ardour of command, of warning, of entreaty, which she threw into the last sentence, staggered me.

"Not mention your name? Not mention her sister's name?" I faltered foolishly.

"Never . . . Never . . . Never . . ." cried she, and her very lips grew white with the passion of her speech. "Can you not trust me?" she then said, with a note so heart-broken in her lovely voice, that I flung headlong entreaties at her to say no more, to tell me nothing further, only to command me and that I would prove to her how I could obey.

She was silent for a little after this, turning away to that blank window, and gazing through it as on a visible scene beyond.

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“It is well that you will trust me in this,” she then said, coming back again. “I am trusting you with more than you will ever know. And now good-night, and God be with you until we meet again. By to-morrow morning I shall be gone.”

No words can tell the solemnity, as of a prayer, that she put into those simple words, “God be with you.”

I took her sweet, cold hand in both mine, and that icy chilliness seemed to run along my arm and strike my heart. I could not have told her that I loved her then, had we been parting forever. All that I could do was to echo her own words:

“God be with you until we meet again.”

And so we said farewell for the first time, and the next morning, very early, Robina came to Hidden House.

PART SECOND

I.

ON the night of my parting with Moina, though I slept but fitfully, I did not chance to be awake at the time of her going, and so she slipped from the place that had known her like a sun-gleam from the waters, and none may see how it withdraws or where is its after-shining.

I woke for good at sunrise, and though my heart weighed me down at first, little by little there crept over me that same tingling curiosity which I had condemned only yesterday, and I was dressed and out of doors betimes.

I do not know what fancy took me to the little graveyard at the top of the cedar lane, unless it was the underlying sadness of my mood, but it was there I was when Robina came dancing and singing up the

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hill, like the very Folly of Life, rushing in blithe intrusion upon Death's privacies.

It was the wildest, clearest piping I had ever heard, more like a boy's note than a girl's, and all interwoven with the thrillingest sweet whistlings, as of some demi-being, half bird, half elfin.

I do not know what song it was she lilted—tune and words clean escaped me. I only know that I never heard the like before nor since, and that sometimes even now, when between sleeping and waking I seem to hear again that wildly sweet confusion and, as it were, superecstasy of mingled sounds, I am but as a child smitten by the music of the Pied Piper and have only the one thought,—to follow after.

Drawn then as if by some spell in blood and spirit, I went forward and, leaning on the sunken gate, watched her dance upward under the gloomy boughs.

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She came as lightly as a blowing leaf, and all about her, waving locks and ribbon-ends and flying skirts seemed informed with her overflow of life. As she drew nearer, I saw that there was a scarlet ribbon through her hair, and about her shoulders a little silken, shining, blood-red shawl that gleamed and fluttered in the windy sunlight like a flame. Her gown was of a dark green, almost black, but with fine emerald lights along the edges of its folds. And she wore red shoes and stockings like the maids in fairy tales.

“I am Robina! I am Robina! I am Robina!” she sang as she danced toward me. “I am everything, and nothing! And I care not!”

Then as she saw me continuing to stare at her in a sort of maze, for indeed both her likeness and unlikeness to Moina were bewildering, she threw back her bright head

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and, swelling out her throat like a bird at song, began to laugh and laugh.

I drew back, wincing, for this laughter ran over my nerves like sharp little fingers, so exactly was it like the laughter with which her grandfather had overwhelmed me the day before, though slighter and more crystalline, as her woman's voice must make it.

"And oh, man . . . young man, why are ye nesting in a grave-yard?" asked she solemnly, as soon as she could catch her breath again. "Is it just the love of contrast? Is it that life burns brighter near the dead? Reach me your hand, and I will try it, too!"

I stretched out my hand, and she clasped it and was up and over the low gate among the periwinkle as though the wind had set her there. In a trice she had flitted from stone to stone, peering and smiling to herself over the inscriptions.

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It is hard, not having seen her with actual eyes, to imagine the vivid incongruity of her presence in that dimly mournful spot, with its carpet of sombre evergreen and its wan, rain-smeared stones. A red hibiscus flower in the hands of a dead man would be as fitting.

Then all at once a horror seized me, and I rushed toward her. She had leaped upon a little grave and was dancing over it, her red shawl held high above her head, her white teeth shining.

I grasped her with scant ceremony and snatched her from it.

"Why did you do that? . . . Why did you do that?" I kept asking her, and held her tightly, afraid that she might leap upon yet another, in her mad self-will. She was light and delicately-boned as a bird, and her waist bent like a twig. She did not struggle, but leaned quiet in my arm and looked up at me unabashed. Then she pointed

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with her little hand and said teasingly:

“ May I no’ dance on my own grave,
good sir? ”

I looked along her pointing finger, and
saw carved on the headstone of the mound
over which she had played her gay antics,

IN MEMORY OF ROBINA JARDINE

There were no dates.

A chill moved under my hair, and my
arm fell from about her, but she leaned
to me and said with a sort of silent laughing:

“ Maybe I ha’ just come back again . . .
to this! ”

And she swept her hand along her way-
ward body.

I gazed at her in dumb coldness. Then
I said again:

“ Why did you do it? ”

“ Oh, man, young man! I did it to feel
more alive! ” she answered in a singing
tone, and still smiled.

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"It was a horrid thing to do," I burst forth fiercely.

My own words so astonished me that I stopped short in some confusion, but she came and hung upon my arm.

"Scold me more," she urged. "I have never till now been scolded by a young man. Let us live! Let us live! Be angry again. That is living. And bend nearer. So. . . . There are two Robinas in your eyes. Very little . . . but alive! alive!"

My head swam suddenly with the nearness of her face. I put up a hand over my eyes.

"There! you have killed them!" she said vexedly, and turned away. I turned after her. She was mad surely, but what a brilliant madness! It was like some vivid bird—a scarlet-tanager—circling, circling, circling, until it should beat out its life with its own wings.

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She began her wild fluting and trilling again as we moved on, and said never another word till we reached the house.

There on the step stood her grandfather, and, to my surprise, the dumb negress a little behind him.

“Ye bonny elf! Come ben [in]!” he cried, and stretched out his arms.

She went to him in a flash, and he lifted and held her tight, the shawl slipping from her shoulders and making a little pool of blood colour at their feet. She seized him by the white locks on either side and brought her face close to his.

“There am I, home a’ready, an’ peeping frae those twa blue windows!” she cried. “There’s three Robinashame the day! Twa in your eyes, and ane in your arms!”

I found afterwards that it was a sort of passion with her, to see herself set thus pigmy-like in the eyes of others.

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"There canna' be too many o' ye for me!" laughed the old man. "Come ben, come ben, ye house-brownie. The hearth-stane's cauld wi'out ye."

I thought of Moina, and my heart was hurt. And then I fell to watching Mercy, the negress, and forgot all else.

She had doubled her great bulk, and was on her knees before Robina, kissing her skirt's hem, kissing her little red shoes. The most horrid throttling sounds came from her working throat. Her big eyes rolled and swam. If love could ever be hideous in its expression, it was then, but none could have mistaken it for other than love. It was as if Robina represented deity to her, and she crouched and adored with sickening spasms of self-abandonment.

The girl, apparently unrevolted, laid one white hand on the turbaned head, and looked steadfastly into the bovine eyes.

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“How you live! How you live!” said she. Then she pointed to the kitchen.

“Enough for now,” she said, and the negress rose, and went without a murmur.

“But she cannot hear!” I exclaimed.

“Oh, yes,” said Robina, “as well as you and me. Do ye not know?”

She lifted up her clear voice and called, “Mercy!”

At once the creature turned and came eagerly back again, her dark face working convulsively with that unhuman seeming joy.

“Open!” said Robina, with an up-toss of her hand.

The negress flung wide her great mouth, and I saw the dreadful shreds and tatters of what had once been a human tongue.

A sickness gushed over me and I could not forbear hiding my face with my hands. When I looked up the negress was gone.

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“ ’Twas done in Jamaica,” said Mr. Jardine. “ ’Tis a horrid-like thing. We do not speak of it. But she worships Robina here, because when she was a bit lassie, and first saw that gruesome sight, she snatched up the scissors and was for sneaking a slice from her own tongue to give the other. Ye stopped at the first bite o’ the steel, though, did ye no’, my lassie?” he ended, smiling.

“ I do not like to be hurt,” said Robina gravely. “ ’Tis pleasant to give where it does not hurt.”

“ And there ye have the warld in a barley-corn!” cried the grandfather.

II.

WE three now went into the living-room, and what was my feeling as I looked about me? I had grown to love this room, its friendly plainness, its restful, faded colouring. Now at windows and over doors were hung rich brocades of a gorgeous scarlet. They were uneven and irregular of edge, as though they had been torn from some Romish church. A square of crimson covered the waxed floor.

The portrait of a girl, very darkened by time, but still glowing in her ruby-coloured gown made in the fashion of a long-gone age, had been set above the chimney. This portrait was the image of Robina—as like as though it had been painted but yesterday. It had the same superabundance of curling, crinkling, free-tossed hair. The light, glancing eyes were

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the same. You looked to see it purse its peaked red lips for elfish whistling. A fine thread of rubies clasped the long throat, and as I gazed at it a wild fancy came to me, as though the graceful head had been severed and then set back again upon its milk-white stem. For despite the tarnishing of time the flesh shone like pearl.

"It will just be Robina herself, will it not, lad?" asked the old man, noting my fixed stare.

"It is indeed a perfect copy of her," I answered. "Who was it?"

"Just another Robina Jardine," he said, smiling to himself, as it were, and I thought of the grave on which the present Robina had danced so blithely but a few moments past. Yet that one must have been still another, for this one in the picture was dressed in a fashion that antedated the Jardines' arrival in America.

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“There has always been one. I hope that there will always be one,” he continued, and looked at me somewhat strangely, I thought.

“I have never begun; I shall never end,” sang Robina, and she touched her fingers to her lips, and then reached up and touched them to the painted lips above her. It was the prettiest, daftest gesture, and made you almost in love with madness. “What a pity, what a pity,” chanted she, addressing the portrait, “that both you and Mercy are dumb! You have both lived so much! You would have so much to tell me!”

Then she whirled suddenly so that her skirts flared out about her. “My book!” she cried. “Where have ye put my book, Grandad?”

It was at first very confusing, the way that those two lapsed into dialect with each

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other, and then back into plain English with me; but then, in truth, I was growing used to it, for whenever deeply moved the old man fell to speaking the broad Scots. He now drew the manuscript from its hiding-place behind his chair-cushion, and she caught it to her and kissed and dandled it like another woman with a baby. "My honey bairn, my life's in ye!" she crooned to it. "Are ye not alive? Dinna' I feel your heart beating upon mine? Red blood's in ye, an' the fire o' life, my bonny dear!"

"So 'tis. So 'tis," chuckled her grandfather.

"And now," continued she, "to put down what's in my head afore it trickles out at my mouth. If I give it to the winds, 'tis gone forever!"

She turned and went over to a little table that was among the new gimcracks

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in the transformed room. Over this table was spread a piece of the crimson brocade, and a big inkstand of French style, decorated with old red-enamel, was set out upon it, together with a package of fair paper and a sheaf of goose-quill pens.

She seated herself there, and fell to trimming a pen with a skill that I have never seen matched. All her motions were quick but perfect. Her fingers were like a little band of well-trained elves, so that it was a delight to watch them, and like magic to see what they achieved.

Then drawing the sheets of paper to her, she began to write, and the change that came over her face was no less than a marvel. It grew keen and set, and a sort of piercing whiteness played upon it. It was no longer a girl's face, indeed it seemed of no sex, and I felt as I watched her that there was a Being in the room,

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but not a Person. She wrote long and steadily, and her grandfather lay back in his big chair, and closed his eyes, so that the only sound in the room was that of the fire, which was "treading-snow," as the saying is in Virginia, for her well-trimmed pen made no noise upon the paper.

Now and then she looked up with wide eyes that did not see us, and I thought again how like, yet unlike, they were to Moina's. For these eyes of Robina's, though in shape and setting like her sister's, were far lighter, with tiny pupils where Moina's were big and black,—and they took the hue of what they reflected, so that I had already seen them blue from the winter sky, and topaz with the firelight, and now, as evening fell, they became of a dark, soft, dusk colour.

Presently she finished, and, throwing down the pen, arched her arms high above

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her head and yawned with a child's abandon. I could see her little tongue curl in her pink mouth like a cat's.

"Will ye no' read it to us, honey?" coaxed her grandfather, but at that she made a jealous snatch at book and papers, and, hustling them into the table-drawer, turned the key upon them and slipped it in her bosom.

"Weel, weel, just give us the name-line, then," said he indulgently.

She eyed him with a sudden, biting mischief.

"'Tis called '*The ghaist that wun hame*' [The ghost that got home]," she then said, "an' 'tis a thing to make the blood creep backward."

The old man's face was veiled with that strange look that I had noted twice or thrice before. "'*The ghaist that wun hame*' . . . '*The ghaist that wun hame*'

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. . . " he repeated to himself, in a low voice. Then he said to her, with cautious wheedling, " Maybe ye'll can expound that to us? "

" Weel, an' I just canna," returned she, not rudely, but with the most perfect determination. " Were all the poets in the world called upon to expound their poetry, they'd have two life-works afore them. Besides, they dinna ken the whole meanin' themselves."

Thereupon she sat herself down on the hearth-rug and began teasing " Tyke," by pulling her red shawl over his ears like a hood. The little beast stiffened himself and would lend no countenance to this game. Once he growled inwardly like a small kettle about to boil over.

" Have a care!" I cried. " He might snap at you."

" Not he," she said carelessly. " He

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doesn't like me, but he's wholesomely in awe of me. And 'tis natural. Both me and the doggie love ourselves too well to spare much for each other. And when I'm home, well he knows his place with Grandad is filled full. There! Awa' wi' ye to your corner, ye thrawn beastie!" she ended, and "Tyke," still rumbling deep within himself, made for the furthest corner of the ingle, and there curled up, lowering nose to paws, but keeping a white-rimmed eye upon her.

Then she went to tidy herself against the supper-hour, and I was left alone with her grandfather.

III.

No sooner was she gone than the old man blazed up like a fire in a draught.

“Man!” cried he, “but is she no’ wonderful!”

“She is indeed,” said I, with ardour.

He laid his hand on my wrist, and I felt it trembling.

“Was I not right to bid ye wait till ye had seen her?”

This cooled me. I drew in like a cautious snail and made some evasive and silly answer.

“Eh! but ye’re not speakin your true thought!” said he, chuckling. “I go by the look in the eye more than by the wag o’ the tongue. She’s kindled sparks in your eyes already, such as never Moina lit there!”

I passed this over in silence, as one of

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those execrable intimacies in which old age sometimes indulges.

“Weel, weel, bide a wee,” he then said, in no wise disconcerted. “I’ve no wish to heckle wi’ ye. Time aye brings things round like a spot on a wheel-tire. But, sirs! What a title was yon! ‘*The ghaist that run hame.*’ What, now, do ye suppose she’ll be meaning by that?”

“I should like rather to know what you surmise, sir,” I answered. “You have a knowledge of her talent which I am without.”

“Aweel, then,” said he, first peering all about him, and then beckoning me closer, “I’ll just tell ye. Have ye ne’er thought what a poor, forlorn thing would be a ghaist blowin’ its lee-lane on every air? Not a trim, canny house-ghaist, ye ken, but ane o’ those wanderin’ speerits that canna’ rest for thinkin’ o’ the joys they had when in

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the flesh. Ay, mannie! Think o' such a creature wanderin its lee-lane—for 'tis borne in on me that ghaists canna' for-gather with each other . . . think on it, with all its desires leaping red hot an' no body to express 'em with! An' ye were such a forlorn, mist-like thing, would ye no' slip in an' take possession,—aye, possession o' the first warm habitation o' flesh and bones ye kenned was empty?"

He stopped and looked at me with a wild eagerness which went through me like cold.

"What do you mean?" I asked, under my breath. "Do you believe in ghosts, and do you think that such a bodiless spirit can enter into a living . . ."

"Whist! Whist!" he spat at me, not angrily but like one in real fear, "those things mustna be said too plain-like. But ye hae my meanin' . . . ye hae my meanin'."

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“ And you actually believe in ghosts? ”
I asked, unable to keep a tinge of scorn
from my voice.

But he was quite as scornful.

“ Keep us! ” cried he, “ an’ what are you
and me but just twa ghaists biding for a
glimpse in twa inns of crumbling flesh?
Doesna Epictetus tell us that we are but
souls bearing up a corp’? ‘ Believe,’ say
you? . . . ’Tis a kenned thing wi’ me! ”

He sat still after this outbreak, and stared
past me into the fire for some moments.
Then he resumed in the same self-convinc-
ing key in which he had begun: “ Ay, and
’tis also borne in on me that like seeks like,
whether in the body or out of the body.
Speerit is drawn to speerit, as deep an-
swereth unto deep. An’ the boldest speerit
wins i’ the end. Ou ay! two householders
canna rule together. No kingdom will bide
long under two kings. . . . But all this is

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juist lig-lag [gibberish] to ye, is it no' ? . . . Now we'll put it by, and come to the solidities o' life."

With this he began speaking the English tongue, greatly to my relief.

"I must ask you to excuse the supper that will be laid before you this night," he said. "'Twill be just cat-lap to you and me, but Robina cannot bear the sight of flesh. Just the reek o't from the kitchen sickens her. I'll bid the carline cook ye a good rasher to-morrow when the lass is off on one of her long jaunts. But to-night 'twill be bean-broth and batter-bread and porridge, and a dish of curds and cream."

I told him that such a meal would suit me excellently, as I had no great liking for meat, and ate it from habit rather than from preference.

"Do ye so, now?" said he, and looked at me with a fresh interest.

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When Mercy had laid the table (Moina always did this when she was at home, and I was used to help her), she struck the old silver gong that stood in the outer hall, and before it had stopped ringing Robina came into the room.

I could but gaze at her. She was splendid as a crimson snow-flower, and the thin silken folds of her scarlet gown moved about her in the draught like petals. She had dressed her head with a wreath of gauze, so that her black hair gleamed as through fire-mist. She looked like the spirit of fire, and so I told her.

She pretended to great haughtiness, and drew up her shining throat.

"I, sir," said she, "am Queen of the Salamanders. I can carry love in the palm of my hand as slaves carry live coals, and not be burned!"

Just the way that she said "love" made

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my heart sting. I sought her eyes, and there came from them a ray that seemed to touch me as a spark might. I thought of Moina and her deep, clear, loving look, and anger rose in me against myself and against that other. She ate daintily and little, and when I saw her red lips flecked with cream I thought again of the blazing snow-flowers of the Californias.

After the table had been cleared, and spread again with its brocade, we gathered about the great fire of apple boughs and hickory, and sat thus in silence for a while, listening to the solemn harping of the wind.

But soon the old man, who seemed oddly restless, leaned forward and said half-timorously:

“Will ye no’ bring forth your lilt-pipe, lassie, and play us a spring of your fire-song? I see ye’re dressed for the dancing . . .”

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The girl did not stir where she lay sunk in a great chair by the ingle-nook. She had wrapped herself from crown to heel in a thin grey web of stuff through which her burning dress gleamed like embers.

“Wait till I hear the call, old playmate,” she said in a drowsy, sombre voice. “And do you darken the lights meantime.”

He rose without a word, and one by one blew out the candles. The room was now but a grotto hung with blowing shadows and banners of flame. Now her figure was lighted up like a sunset cloud. Now she subsided to a heap of ashes. Outside, that deep, thrumming minor chord to which all nature is set rose and sank, wavered, died away, and pealed again.

The old man sat motionless, and the girl seemed folded in upon herself like some night-blooming flower waiting the hour for unclosing. Once Tyke barked fiercely in

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his sleep and sprang up trembling, only to sink down again, after circling round and round. One eye he kept open, however, and fixed it on the girl.

Then once more the old man moved stealthily. In one of the corner cupboards, he unlocked a secret drawer, and took forth a strange, wild-wood looking instrument of music—two pipes set in a triangle such as Marsyas might have played on. This he laid softly on Robina's knees and withdrew again into the shadows.

All at once she cried out in a clear, light voice:

“Feed the fire-folk! Feed the fire-folk! Do ye no' hear them clamourin' for nourishment?”

With shining eyes, as of a child at Christmas, the old man hastened and tossed bundle after bundle of some fragrant, prepared wood upon the fire, which shivered

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into a myriad iridescent sparkles, and then shot forth tongues of multi-coloured flame. And Robina, seizing the pipes, leaped forth from her ashen chrysalis and stood quivering like another flame upon the hearth.

God knows what it was she played or how she played it. The whole of Spring seemed gathered in that Winter room. It was like a forest verbal with the ecstasy of living—like the bridal-song of Dryads—like the laughter of a trillion-trillion leaves shaken with their loves. And then, as she began to dance, it was that forest on fire, her voice went out like smoke, the pipes dropped from her hands.

“I dance my Credo!” she cried to us. “Where words fail I give my dancing! I am Robina! Robina! Robina! Look! This I believe!”

None may imagine that dancing, and it is not to be described. It was as beautiful

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and terrible as life. It was as unshamed as the loves of sun and earth. It was inspired, but from the breath of what passionate, forbidden deity, who shall say? It passed across the valley of dead loves where lie old sins, and they rose and clothed themselves in beauty and danced also. In that dance all things, save delight and pleasure, wavered, and were smelted and ran together like the snake of fire down a volcano's side. God seemed useless—an old Man outworn by the ages—the very Ancient of Days fallen on his dotage. It was the immortal and unspeakable ceremonial dance of Self adoring Self. This am I. This I worship. This is to me Alpha and Omega. And because life gives me this, my body, there is to me no good but the life of the body, and to me there is no evil but the death of the body.

I gaped and trembled and the sweat ran

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from me while that wonderful mad-woman danced as before the Pharaoh. If there be such a thing as possession I saw it that night, and what is man's last-lit torch of knowledge but a spark that lives for an instant on the black chimney throat of the unknowable? I was there in that little mountain room, now ablaze with that horrific yet ineffable spectacle, like the poor wood-cutter in the folk-tale, who, passing through a door in a tree, found himself in a temple of Babylon. The Orient that is part of every Occidental was loosed in me. I was a sultan, and she my slave. I was an Arab sheik, and she my captive. I was Ahmed, and she was Peribanou. Musk and blood and champak scented the air. . . .

Then all at once her dancing changed, and she was flame again, and I the wood that nourished it. . . .

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There came a gush of cold air. The ashes on the hearth were scattered. The casement struck to and fro with shattering blows. I heard a girl's shrill scream of terror: "The bird! The bird!"

Like one struggling from a drugged sleep, I crept back into my daily self.

Robina was clinging to her grandfather, and following with wide, strained eyes the terrified flight of a cardinal that had been blown in at the open window. Round and round the bird circled, now dipping into the shadows, now gleaming like a jewel in the firelight. Its crimson beak was parted, its crest lowered. Again and again it dashed against the ceiling, leaving streaks as scarlet as its plumage.

"Save it! Oh, save it!" cried the girl, and I heard her teeth chattering.

I caught up the brocade from the table and tried to guide the poor creature toward

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the window, but it eluded me like a sprite. I mounted upon the furniture, ran this way and that, in vain. Still it dashed itself against the ceiling and dived into the shadows. Tyke leaped and barked convulsively.

“Put him out of the room!” I cried, enraged at my own futility and the dog’s irritating noise. Mr. Jardine took him by the nape and dropped him into the hall. By this time Robina looked like a figure of snow with her scarlet finery withered about her, and her hands clasped together round her throat. Her eyes still followed the bird, as though in some way her life was bound up in its movements.

It happened in an eye-blink—a piteous, sickening sight that my dreams have never been rid of. Down it flew, straight as a sun-streak, straight and swift into the very core of the great fire. There was a whiff,

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a crisping sound, a darkening of the incandescent centre. . . . The little life was gone as when a child sets its foot upon a spark.

It was painful enough in all conscience, but nothing could have accounted for its effect upon Robina.

She ran forward like one demented, and would have searched for it in the coals with her naked hands.

“Do ye no’ ken? . . . Do ye no’ ken? . . . ” she kept sobbing. “’Tis a prophecy. . . . It has happened before. ’Twill happen again. . . . Out of the dark . . . into the light. . . . Out of the light . . . into the fire. . . . Will none stay me? . . . Will none help me? . . . Will none fight for me? . . . Must I flit out and in . . . out and in . . . for ever and ever? . . . ’Twas no’ a bird. . . . ’Twas a poor bit spirit. . . . A poor bit

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ghost seeking a fleshly habitation. . . .
Do ye no' ken? . . . Do ye no' ken? . . .”

Her grandfather bore her off to bed at last, still resisting, still muttering. I heard her voice dying away along the gusty hall. . . . “Do ye no' ken? . . . Do ye no' ken?”

I slept that night like one who sinks unconscious in the snow-sleep, but from time to time I tore myself awake, so dreadful was that slumber.

IV.

I DREADED, yet longed, to see Robina again, with that surging of opposed passions, which reveals man to himself as the Master Mystery. Who can fathom the deeps of exultation from which David cried, "My heart is fixed, O God; my heart is fixed!"

A sense of guilt, as though I had committed some wanton act in my dreams, for which God held me responsible, overwhelmed me. I could not suppose that the blurred green of my dressing-glass was the whole cause of my altered looks. I had the appearance of a man risen from fever.

But though I went downstairs with parching tongue and heart hammering, I found no Robina in the living-room, and the old man also was without.

I had no zest for work or reading, and so sat for some hours, gazing on the fire,

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and going over and over, with a wearying lucidity, all the happenings of yesterday. It seemed as if this strange madness of the girl were a catching sickness, for I was in no wise my usual self, and bright, odious, enchanting thoughts kept weaving their arabesques against the dark background of my mood. I tried to think of Moina, and she seemed pale and far away and chill as the Ice-Maiden in the story. Yet I had loved her well, nay, I knew that I loved her now. I was like those in fever, who turn always first from them they have held dearest. Had I not seen my old grandfather, weeping like a child on the outer steps because his son had driven him from the room in his delirium? Yes, it was like that with me. What would I not have given to lean my head on Moina's sweet breast, and sob like a child after an evil dream?



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I had always heard it said it was a racking thing to be near madness, and now the aching both of soul and body told me how true was this saying.

I had a great wrestling with my sick soul, however, and, returning to my room, wrote for a long time in my journal, being under a truly Romish necessity for self-confession. These pages made such dreadful reading, however, that I burned them before I went downstairs again. Yet they had eased me in some strange fashion, and when I descended for the second time I was in a calmer frame.

The old man, who was busy with the pruning of his orchard (it was now nearly December), had not returned, and not till sunset did Robina enter.

She came carrying before her a great bough of maple, taller than herself, and through this she looked at me as through a

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tremble of red flamelets, shaking the leaves as she held the bough upright on the floor, and laughing with her high, elfin laughter.

“ Is it no’ as bonny as blood? ” she called to me.

She must have seen the shrinking in my face, for, placing the bough against the wall so that it seemed to light up the whole room, she came and stood over me, and looked steadfastly at me, crossing her arms behind her.

“ And for why should ye scunner [shudder] at the thought of blood being bonny? ” asked she. “ Is it no’ the very jewels o’ life, running through our veins like strings of rubies through a maid’s fingers? If rubies are bonny, why not blood-drops? They’re the living jewels o’ God, I tell ye, and naught is bonnier in the whole world than just men’s life-blood! ”

With that she turned, and, fixing some

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of the maple leaves in her black hair, sat down opposite me on a little stool in the other ingle-nook.

She was wearing again the green gown in which I had first seen her, but her hose were gray woollen and her shoes of stouter make and covered with clay. Reaching behind her under the cushion of the settle, she now pulled out the red shoes and stockings, and with an extraordinary dexterity shod and gartered herself before me, without the least immodesty in any wise. Once I could not help glancing with pleasure at her little ankle, which seemed not much larger and quite as white as a peeled elm-twigg, and she caught my eye and broke into the frankest dimples.

“Have I no’ an ankle for a bracelet?” she demanded seriously. Then stretching out her foot now gleaming in its scarlet shoe: “Yon’s a bonny foot, but full of life-

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blood," she said demurely. "Ye'd better not be looking too hard at it, else ye'll get a grue [a shiver of disgust]."

I could not help laughing at this, and the everyday sound of it seemed to dispel some of the hot mists in my head. I forgot the wild events of yesternight and saw her only as a young girl with a natural mischief in her sparkling face, and Eve's pretty heritage of coquetry becoming her like the maple leaves in her hair.

"You must not think me such a sour prig," I said. "Your feet are as pretty as were ever the Little Sea Maid's, who sold her tongue for them. There's about just enough material in your tongue to make those feet, I fancy," ended I, thinking to please her. But she made the oddest little mouth at me.

"I know very well indeed what it is you fancy," she now said, dropping her

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Scots lingo. "You fancy I am mad, and that you must humour me."

This so took away my breath, that I had not a word to answer.

"Man dear," she then continued, "I'll just make you the gift of a big truth. There is none in this whole world so mad as the man who thinks he's not mad. For what is life but madness? And who is saner than the dead? And would you lie quiet and reasonable in a grave, or would you love and laugh with the other madmen? Who made this mad world if not the maddest Madman of them all? Is it not a fine toy for the Master Madman, this spinning, glittering, shrieking, fleeing world, that leaves no track on the wide air, so that even God must follow His game at random? When He smites it, it bleeds. When He scourges it, it groans. And He hurls it down the blind ways of timeless space,

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with never a goal, just that He, the Divine Madman, may have a toy to His madness forever and ever!"

She had risen, and stood white and small and deadly, with eyes fixed before her, and pointing finger, as though she thus blasphemously accused her Maker face to face.

All the old horror came upon me as strong as before, and with it a fascination even stronger. Could it be that fire had fallen from heaven upon less offenders, and that she stood there scathless?

And as I sat stunned, half looking for some miracle of divine wrath, she turned composedly and, smoothing down her lawn undersleeves, said in a matter-of-fact voice:

"And now I'll just put that in writing afore I forget it."

I looked at her with such bewildered eyes that she stopped on the way to her writing-table, and touched me soothingly on the shoulder, smiling as she did so.

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"Poor lad!" said she. "Do not glower as though ye'd seen a bogle. If all flesh is grass, all poets are deadly-nightshades. Be sure ye never eat one by mistake!"

After that she became wholly absorbed in her writing, and did not speak again until her grandfather returned from the orchard, and Mercy came to lay the table for supper.

The rest of the evening passed with singular quiet. After supper, Robina brought forward the little flax-wheel, and though there was no tow on it, sat turning it dreamily in the firelight until bedtime. Its soft whir sounded like a moth caught between the window-panes.

"Ye daft lassie," laughed her grandfather, "what d'ye think ye're spinnin'?"

"The stuff o' dreams," she answered him.

V.

As the days went by I came to a strange tangle of thought in regard to Robina. Was she really mad, or only mad by flaws, as the wind is to which the spirit hath been likened? Was she like Hamlet, only mad north-northwest, when her spirit blew a gale from that quarter? And was this madness of hers perhaps just the poetic frenzy of which the ancients spoke? And were we all, as she had said, something touched with madness when we rose on our passions above the norm of our common humanity? Was it indeed the only true sanity to be dead, and so always of the same mind? But no, according to my faith, only our bodies died,—the soul, the mind, the “I” in us, lived on forever.

As we came to speak oftener together, I was confounded by the boldness of her

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conception of these things. She believed in a Higher Power, it is true, but her God seemed to me a Demon. And her fearlessness in contemplating things invisible wrought in me a giddiness as of one peering over the edge of the world into an immeasurable void. She was as familiar in her dealings with the unknowable as a child with its mother's breast: as it were, plucked Mystery by the beard, and laughed into its awful countenance.

When I reminded her one day that God is Love, she replied that God is Power seemed to her a more probable surmise, and, whipping suddenly round on me, she asked if I knew the Scotch term for poet.

"It is 'Makker,'" she informed me, "and the Greek means Maker also. I am thinking that God will be just a great 'Makker,' a great Poet. Little He cares what happens the characters in His poems, so

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they but act them out fittingly. And all subjects are alike to Him, as to all other poets. Hell, now, what a thought was there! So He made the great poem called Hell—'tis as great as Paradise. Man! but He must have had a heaven-quake of joy when He thought out Satan! No, He's just the Chief Poet, and makes things as they rise in His mind. We call them good and bad, but there's no 'good and bad' to a poet. There's nothing but poems."

Such words as these were like coals of fire to me, yet I must needs scorch myself again and again, and yet again. I was not happy near her, but I was doubly wretched away from her. I was like one who has heard the Fairy-harp, and who, though he dwindles and pines away for all that he has held dear, must yet follow that eldritch music into the false splendours of the underworld, and leave behind him

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the calm, familiar sky. And Moina's face grew ever fainter, fading like a pencilled song from the pages of my heart, until one day I came face to face with myself, in the glass of a single thought. The thought was: "*I am glad now that I never told Moina that I loved her.*"

It is vain to try to grasp an escaping love. You but hold a dead bird in your hand when the struggle is over. I went dully, and pondered this strange thing which we call "self," and from which we cannot command even a tear or a laugh at will, but are the servants of its tears and laughter. We may say "Peace, be still," to a passion and be obeyed, but never, "Come forth."

One morning after Robina had dwelt with us about a month, I woke to find the mountains clothed in whiteness, and the forest turned to glass. The sun did not

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shine forth brightly, but hung in the dun air like a great blossom of fire. So majestic and unearthly was the spectacle that I hastened to dress myself, longing to go out into it and search if God might not come nearer to a world so transformed with purity.

Robina stepped upon the stair just when I did. She was wrapped in furs from head to foot, and had on a scarlet hood, from which her eyes gleamed wildly, with a sort of anger in them.

“You are going out? So am I,” she said to me. “I hate the snow, but it draws me. It wipes all colour from my thoughts as it does from the earth. Look!” she cried, as we stood in the doorway. “Look how like a corpse the world is! Dead and cold as the moon. How horrible is this white plague! The leprosy of winter! Do ye not find it contagious? Shall we not also

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grow white, and cold, and stiff if we mix with it?"

My spiritual mood was gone at a touch. I saw the mountains glaring at us as in a white masque of Death. And I resented, yet could not free myself from her strong influence.

"Come," she then said. "Let us walk hand in hand. We shall be safer."

So hand in hand we walked out into that blank world.

Presently I felt her shudder. Her hand shook in mine.

"'Tis a sign . . ." she said. "Do ye no' feel it's a sign?"

"Of what?" I asked her.

"Of something coming . . . coming . . . coming. . . . As empty as this whiteness . . . as stealthy . . ."

She shuddered again, more violently than before,

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"Man!" she cried presently, "I think yon Italian was right and that Hell is frozen!"

Then I essayed bluntness, and a vexation that I did not feel, for the creeping of her dread was on me.

"You are not well," I said, "and you're cold. You had better go back to the house and take a good drink of brandy."

She looked up at me with the most thrilling scorn.

"And ye'd better go ben [into] the house o' Life an' take a dram o' vitality!" she said in her vigorous Scots talk. "Man dear, ye're but half alive, and so ye needna have but a half fear o' death! There's a lad dances in my grandad's blue een, but in yours I see a gray beard!"

This put me in a whirl of anger, I know not why, unless that our fates be poised on such atoms.

"'A greybeard'?" I echoed, smarting.

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“ If you but knew what was in my heart this minute, you’d not be so fearful of the snow! ”

She grew light in a trice, pursed up her lips as if to whistle, and began to swing my hand backward and forward.

“ Will it be a roaring lion? ” she asked teasingly. “ And will it come and lap snow from my hand? ”

The next instant, like the elf she was, she had darted forward, and, together with her mocking laughter, came a pelt of snow in my face that half blinded me. Then she ran, and I set off in pursuit. But hers was no girl’s running. She sped like a boy . . . like a deer. . . . Letting slip her heavy furs, she flew before me in her scarlet cloak and hood like a blowing poppy. But I caught her at last, and held her, and as her light, glancing eyes met mine, with that wild beam pouring from them, her madness

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seized me so that I shook with it, and for a moment could only hold her, thus shaken in my arms, and fight for breath.

Then suddenly she began to sing, right into my face, so that it poured over and through me like a stream of sparks:

“Thaur’s a bluid-red flower that blaws,
In th’ white o’ winter snaws:
He that plucks the bonny wight
Gangs sweetly gyte! Gangs sweetly gyte!”¹

She just paused and then, still nearer:

“Luve’s red-flower’s my mouth so bright;
Gang sweetly gyte! Gang sweetly gyte!”

The earth spun with us, and I set my mouth to hers in a kiss such as draws life up by the roots.

All at once she stiffened in my arms.

“Hark! Do ye no’ hear it callin’?” she asked, and her voice was full of fear like a child’s.

¹ Goes sweetly mad.

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"I hear nothing but my heart and your heart," said I, for I was drunken now with my madness.

"Whist! Whist!" she said, and laid her hand sharply on my lips. "There! . . . Do ye no' hear? . . . Far, far away. . . . As little as a voice in a dream?"

"And what is it calling?" I asked, to humour her.

She turned deadly white, and sank down in my clasp.

"Oh, it is a fearsome name it is calling!" she moaned forth, like one in dire pain. "Whiles I remember it, an' whiles I forget. . . . When I hear it in my sleep, I wake in a cauld sweat."

She trembled like one with ague, and clung to me desperately. But all passion was gone from her touch. She would have clung to the icy hillside with as much desperation.

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"You are ill," I cried. "You are very ill. . . . Come back with me to the house . . ."

"Ah! . . . ah! . . ." she here screamed out on a wild note, covering her ears. "I will not hear. . . . I will not hear . . ."

"What is it? . . . What will you not hear?"

"That name! . . . That name! . . ."

"What name? In God's mercy, what name?"

"Oh, do ye no' hear it? . . . The woods are full of it . . ."

"But what name? . . . What name?"

Then she turned in my arms and shrieked it in my face:

"*Moina! . . . Moina! . . . Moina . . .*"

My heart checked, and I went blind for a second.

PART THIRD

I.

WHEN I came to myself the next instant, she was standing before me, swaying slightly, with a curious, drowsy look at nothing, from under her half-closed lids.

“Robina!” I cried, seizing her by both arms. “Robina!”

“Ay, that’s well,” she murmured in a low monotone. “Call me that. . . . Call me that. . . . Drown the other. . . . Drown the other . . .”

“Are you dying?” I cried, beside myself, and I shook her to and fro. “Wake! . . . Wake! . . .”

She looked at me with a heavy effort of the lids, but seemed to be addressing some one else.

“I will not . . .” she said. “I will not. . . . Leave me alone. . . . I will not go. . . . I will stay. . . . I will not go . . .”

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Again her lids almost closed, she swayed forward against me. I tried to take her up in my arms to carry her to the house, but with the sudden strength of madness, she fought so fiercely that I was obliged to set her down again.

Then a fearful, convulsed look of rage and terror and extremity swept her face. She tore at the strings of her hood, and cried out in a sort of howling:

“Mercy! . . . Mercy! . . .”

It sounded so like an appeal for life, that I was overcome with horror. I tried to sooth her, to get near her, but she fought me off. Not until I saw the figure of the negress coming black and gigantic through the snow did I realize that the frenzied appeal had been to her.

And now once more I was witness of a scene that filled me with an unspeakable, sick dread. The creature rushed by me like

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the black Afrit of the Lamp. Taking Robina on one arm, as though she had been an infant, she bathed her face and throat with the powdery snow, then, lowering her to her knee, breathed upon her with strange mutterings and gesticulations.

After a few moments of this, Robina got suddenly to her feet and pushed back her snow-wet hair with a dazed gesture. But her eyes were wide open now, and, though her nostrils seemed pinched, she breathed deeply. The negress then rose and stood before her, making powerful gestures of command as though bidding some one or thing to come forth. The girl took a step toward her and stood still. Again the negress made those vehement gestures, and again the girl advanced one step . . . then two . . . then one step more. Her eyes grew bright and eager. The blood flared in her white face.

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“ I will not go! . . . Go, *you!* . . . ” she cried, then stopped, wavered. Her lids drooped. . . . All her face grew drowsy. The lids closed. She collapsed suddenly like a tree that has been cut through, falling at the negress’s feet.

With uncouth, choking cries, the dumb creature struggled to rouse her again, and I ran now to help her, having come to some use of my wits once more. But she pushed me away so fiercely that I almost lost my footing. I could not be angry, however, when I looked upon that primeval and piteous distress. She panted like a spent dog. Great tears ran and froze on her dark cheeks. . . . She held the girl to her bosom—rocked her—moaned over her. . . .

Then all at once the submission of a slave seemed to come upon her. She rose, and, looking from me to Robina, made a gesture as though to say all further effort would

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be useless; stooped again, and, lifting the still senseless girl, began to walk steadily and impassively toward the house.

I went beside her, in a sullen stupefaction of wretchedness. I had violated every instinct of my higher self, only to find that I was the toy of circumstances as fantastic and incredible as the windings of a nightmare.

That Robina was not dead or dying, I knew, for the pulse in the hand that hung over the negress's shoulder beat—slowly, it is true, but with a rhythmic steadiness.

No, there was not the cause of my misery. What galled, what tortured me, was that I had stooped lower than manhood, had grovelled in the shipwreck of my nature, to gather what? A beautiful husk that covered madness. . . . A fair casket that held the fairy-gold which turns to withered leaves in the hands of him who grasps it.

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I had hungered for Robina's lips, and I had kissed them, and Robina's soul was a thing at the beck and call of a Jamaican negress. In her extremity she had turned from me "to the sooty bosom of such a thing as thou!" I thought in my bitterness, as I trod through the snow at the huge creature's side, and held Robina's living hand in mine, as it had been the hand of a corpse.

II.

MR. JARDINE came from the door to meet us, but his conduct was a new amazement. When I looked to see a frantic and uncontrollable grief, his face wore only the grim, set expression with which strong natures meet a misfortune that is not unexpected and must be endured.

“Take her into the living-room,” he said to Mercy. “It is too cold upstairs. I will go myself for Miss Jardine.”

Then he turned and put his arm through mine.

“Poor lad,” said he, “ye’ve gotten a sore stroke. Ye look fair swooning yoursel’. But ’tis none so deadly as ye think. Robina will be havin’ these dwams [swoons] from babyhood. Whiles they last eight-and-forty hours,—and whiles four-and-twenty, but she’s none the worse for them

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in the end. Just care and quiet's what she needs, and a month's coddling with her Auntie . . . that's my sister, Ellen Jardine, ye ken. Come ben the house to a bit whisky. Ye're fair wambly wi' the fright o't."

I went shaking into the house with him, and he poured me nearly half a tumbler of raw, peat-scented Scotch whisky, which I swallowed at a gulp and felt not at all, save that my body came under my control after taking it.

The negress had laid Robina on the settle near the fire and covered her with Mr. Jardine's plaid. Her lips were white and drawn back, showing her little teeth pitheously, as I had once seen in a frozen kitten. Her eyes gleamed in two silver streaks between her lids. You could not see or hear her breathe. I covered my face and sank down opposite her, with all the cords

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of manhood slackened in me. And I heard as if from a far, lonely place the voice of Mr. Jardine giving instructions to the negress.

“Ye’ll just put the horse to the sleigh yourself if Willy is no’ here,” he told her, “and have in two raccoon rugs. ’Twill be perishin’ cold by night-time. Be quick now!”

Then he came and sat by me, and took down my hands from my face as gently as a mother could have done.

“Laddie, hearken to me,” he said. “Ye’re no’ to go to bits like a mannack at a pop-gun. Ye’ve got to be a’ the man that ever your feyther made ye . . . for *her* sake . . . for the sake o’ Robina there. Now mind me: there’s nae sickness in the lassie,—just these bit d’wams, that hurt her in no wise when they’re by. And look ye. . . . I’m an old gaffer, but none sae

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old that I've forgot the bonny face o' luve. . . . When she's once married these swouns and tirrorives will melt from her like this snow when the sun peeps . . ."

He stopped suddenly, and I felt his great hand catch my shoulder. His voice changed. It had menace in it.

"Ye luve her, do ye no'?" he said close to me.

I nodded miserably, being beyond speech. And it was love that I felt for Robina, a different love from what I had given Moina, yet still love. And I realized, in that throe of the spirit with which strange truths are brought forth, that love is not one but multiform,—that a man may not say, "I will love this woman always and her only," but is at the mercy of his own elements, and as fluctuant as a compound under the touch of some mighty and invisible chemist. And it seemed to me that

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I must spend the rest of my life in warning others of the pitfall of the fact that I had discovered. For men suddenly realizing a great truth, often think that they have perceived a new truth, whereas truth, like eternity, has no beginning.

All this passed through me in a whiff as thoughts do, and I felt the fierce old hand shake me roughly.

"Speak out!" said Mr. Jardine. "I want words."

"Yes. . . . I love her," answered I, and looked into his eyes.

This pacified him.

"Weel, weel," he said kindly, "dinna look so heart-broke. Love mends all things."

Then Mercy came to the door, and I rose and helped him on with his great-coat of raccoon-skins.

"Now, dinna torture yoursel'," he said

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in parting. "There's nothing for it but to bide the Almighty's leisure. Just sit quietly, and keep the fire fed."

He went, and I returned to hold watch over the empty casket from which the jewel of Robina's wits had been filched by some cruel law whose working none understood.

I drew the plaid over one little hand, which had slipped down and was cold as though it lay already in the grave. And as I sat and watched her, a great and melting pity welled in me, and thawed the last hardness from my heart. Should I love her, and yet desert her in her desperate need? Could I call that love which shrank from fighting with her against this unseen enemy, who struck her cravenly from behind when life was at its brightest? "Love mends all things," the old man had said, and might not my love mend this

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fragile vase that held Robina, and return her to herself a lovely and imperishable gift? In my tumultuous thoughts, Moina shone calm and pure and still, like an ancient image to which men prayed; not like a creature of warm, human substance, with like passions as myself; not like the stinging sweetness which I had called "Robina."

I went nearer and knelt beside her stark form. Could it be possible that she would ever kindle into life again? I laid my ear upon her heart. Its slow, faint beating seemed like a knocking at the door of death. I pressed my lips to her loose hair, and its soft, elastic waves were far more alive than she

Then I bent my head and stayed for a long time, resting as it were on a great deep of silent prayer, which buoyed me up and floated me to a calmer haven.

The old clock striking five roused me.

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I looked up . . . into Robina's open eyes. She was looking at me quietly, softly, intelligently. I did not stir, so fearful was I of doing some wrong thing in my ignorance, and so we just remained motionless, gazing, gazing, gazing at each other,—how long I do not know.

And as we gazed, a trouble grew on me. Robina was looking at me, and yet, were those Robina's eyes? They were dark, full, and soft. Robina's were light and glancing, and the lids narrowed about them in a strange, elfish fashion. These lids curved broad and wide. Then my heart stabbed in my breast, and for an instant I felt the horror of madness. Those were Moina's eyes looking at me. The great pupils painted them black in the twilight—besides . . . it was Moina's spirit that looked from them. As surely as we recognise a face behind the glass of a window, I recognized Moina's soul.

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I felt a terror that I had never felt till then but in dreams. I heard a sound that must have been my own voice. . . . Sheer, craven, cold, unreasoning fear bent me to my knees. I grasped instinctively for support, and clutched the edge of the settle.

"What is it? . . . Why are you frightened?" said the voice of Moina, weak, faint, with pauses between the words, yet like the thundering of drums to my appalled senses.

I tried to speak. I must have fainted, for when I found myself again I was lying full length along the floor, and those dark, steady eyes, the eyes of Moina, were looking down upon me.

"I am thirsty," said the voice, and it was still the voice of Moina.

Gathering all my faculties by a supreme effort, I managed to pour and bring her some water, but my hand shook so that it

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was well-nigh impossible for her to drink, and she was too weak to hold the glass, but she managed to swallow a few drops.

She said "Thank you" very sweetly, and then closed her eyes, and at once I began to doubt my own senses, and to reason with my racing heart. It was an illusion, a hallucination. I had received a great shock and my body was playing tricks upon me. I stood in a sort of trance, and longed and dreaded with a dissolving conflict of desires, that she would again open her eyes and speak, that I might be sure. And in my bitter plight and confusion I spoke that name.

"Moina !"

At once the dark eyes came gently open and looked up at me.

"Moina !" I said again, and this time she replied. I had to stoop near to hear the wavering sentence. She was saying:

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"You must never mention my name to her . . . never, never . . . never . . ."

I suppose that when the height of terror is reached, we grow numb, as under any other excessive torture. I was conscious of no further sensation whatever, except a piercing cold, which seemed to be spread between my flesh and my bones, as though within I were folded in a sheet of ice.

"Promise," said the voice again.

"I promise," I replied.

"Now I will sleep a little," she said, and, turning on her side, fell into a tranquil slumber.

Mr. Jardine came in, followed by a tiny woman with sleek gray hair and a dreadful, little white face that had been moulded by terror.

"How is Robina?" he asked, in the mechanical way that we all ask fruitless questions in time of stress

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“There is no Robina,” I said, looking full into his eyes.

“God’s mercy! What?” cried he.

“Robina is dead,” I answered.

“Man! Are ye mad?” he shouted brokenly, and he went over to the settle.

“Here, here is Robina alive as you are.”

“That,” said I, and I began laughing, “is Moina.”

Then blackness smothered me and I knew nothing more for many days.

III.

WE may not take the sacred name of Mystery in vain. Men cannot speak of things as occult and then drag them forth into the light of common day, and analyze and probe and discover them to others and yet call them hidden. There be many who think that they have found the keys to these high secrets of Nature, and in every age the keys are called by different names; yet to no man has that lock ever opened,—none has ever done more than peer at the slit of light which shows where the key has been set a little awry in her strong lock, by the High Priestess. We make little names for great facts and think that we understand the facts because we can name them, but none answers to its name like a bidden pet: they come and go at will, call them how we choose, and we are still in the case of the

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man who wrote an essay to prove that the "Greeks were familiar with the phenomena of electricity, because the Greek word for amber is 'electron.' " I have no solution to offer for the dread mystery which broke my life in two as a child snaps a twig across its knee.

There were others who thought to solve it,—Mr. Jardine and his sister Ellen,—but the latter never came out plainly with her conclusions.

This kindly but dwindled soul nursed me with a pathetic scrupulousness through the fever which followed on that dreadful day of Moina's return.

Her little, shrunken, fear-set face grew to be the object to which my senses clung for sustainment in a universe which seemed flowing past me like dark waters. I grew familiar with it by dawn-light and candle-light, to value its wan marredness more

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than beauty, to search for and to find in it that mother-pity which is the gift of so many childless women, and supremely the gift of such as have forsworn marriage from high and selfless motives; for I would not allow my own mother to be informed of my sickness, and indeed its physical dangers were past in less than a fortnight.

As for my inner man, I fear that blight requires a medicine for which the physician Life has no prescription.

As I grew stronger, I told Miss Jardine plainly that I must either speak out to some one or risk my reason a second time. She told me gently that I might say out my heart to her, for none other in the whole world could understand so well as she the fire which was eating it. And with this she laid her small, dry hand against her breast, with a gesture which made me think of those who wandered in the dread halls of Eblis.

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It was from her that I learned the sad history of this branch of the Jardines. There was a strange legend in the family, handed down through long years, a legend of two souls that fought in certain generations for the possession of one body. There was even an old rhyme about it which she quoted to me:

“Twa ghaists in ae flesh
Fecht like mermen in a mesh.
Gin the body be na'rent,
Ae ghaist shall be tent.”

That is to say, that either the physical body dies, or one of the contending spirits conquers and dwells within it continuously. The more rational idea, however, was that of a strange and dreadful madness, which skipped sometimes one, sometimes several generations, and which took the form of a dual or separated personality, manifesting itself in some unhappy daughter of the house.

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None knew when the curse would descend, whether from parent to child or grandparent to grandchild. By a strange coincidence, in the one other case she had known, that of her own grandmother, the name had been Robina. But legend had it that the second being or person in these cases always called herself Robina.

It caused poor Miss Jardine acute suffering to speak of these things so plainly, and, what was more distressing, a positive and withering terror. Her voice failed, she trembled, and her face seemed to contract and sink inward as it were, so that I did not question her keenly as to her views on the dread subject. On one point only did she show the courage of a very lioness. This was the question of the right of any woman of their family to marry. She kindled, she grew strangely, grotesquely eloquent on this subject. The

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breath of her righteous asceticism blew the dead embers of her life into a radiant glow, and she changed in the twinkling of an eye, and shone through the husk of her withered body like a veiled seraph.

“And Moina sees all this as I do!” she would cry. “The Almighty hath unsealed her eyes and she does not blench. She will never marry to bring down the fearsome curse on others. She has vowed it to the Lord.”

The first time that she made this statement I was too weak to do aught but listen in a feeble haze of shifting, aimless thought, but one day, as I grew stronger, I answered her.

“Yes,” I said, “but there is Robina—that part of her which is Robina—what does she say?”

Her look of terror was abject.

“Man,” she faltered, trembling grievously, “ye’d no’ listen to Robina?”

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She got up and bent her old knees before me.

“Oh, ye would not do such a black wickedness! Ye would not descend into hell . . . only Christ could do that and not bide there for evermore!”

I soothed her as well as I could, but a sort of sick obstinacy had me. My illness made me peevish and sullen when crossed.

“Robina has as much right to life as Moina,” I told her.

Then she came and whispered close to me:

“Man, how will ye be sure o’ that?”

The words and the tone in which they were uttered made my flesh creep. I looked away from her. At that moment she seemed as horrible to me as Amina.

And yet . . . and yet . . . what was I to think? How fix these wild and whirling facts to any theory? Here were two entities, as distinct, as different, from each

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other as any beings that had ever been clothed in separate bodies. Yet they shared one body. "Twa ghaists in ae flesh" . . . the old, grisly rhyme haunted me. This idea of two spirits fighting for one body seemed to me the most horrible that I had ever heard. That were insanity even to entertain such a thought for a moment. And yet . . . and yet . . . Robina's words and cries of that terrible morning in the snow-bound wood came back to me. "I will not go. . . . Let me alone. . . . I will not go. . . . Go, *you!*"

I writhed and smothered in the grasp of this monstrous possibility. But no . . . such things were not possible. Had not Emerson himself cried, "Oh, my brothers, God exists!" . . . And if God existed, could such horrors as these exist with him? . . . Then again I was haunted by Robina's words, "God is only a great 'Makker'

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. . . a great Poet. . . . There is no good and bad to a poet. There is nothing but poems . . . ” Then again I was caught in more practical webs of questioning. How was it that Moina knew, and Robina did not know? And yet that day had not Robina shrieked out Moina’s name? I questioned the poor aunt, ruthless in my searing curiosity . . . aware that, in some sort, my reason really depended upon a rational comprehension, in part at least, of these terrible phenomena.

I found that Moina had discovered the fact of her second entity, through finding a diary of Robina’s which had been hidden in the attic near her room. When she came to her aunt with this strange book, and with questionings also as to the unaccountable gaps of nothingness by which her life was broken, Miss Jardine had thought it best to tell her the entire truth.

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Mr. Jardine had raged at her for doing so. The cause of his anger was as simple as it was dreadful.

"Ye see," said the old woman, "Robina was aye his favourite. He wadna give a bawbee if he never saw Moina more . . . so that Robina bided always."

"But," I said brokenly, for the complexity of the thing was both awful and heart-rending, "Robina needs love too . . . and you give all yours to Moina."

Miss Jardine looked at me with grimly glittering eyes.

"Moina," said she, "is a child of God, an' was, forbye, christened in a kirk."

Again I shuddered. Even poor Robina's name was grudged to her. Without book or bell or holy water she had given it to herself. And suddenly I remembered the title of the poem she had written on the first day of her return. . . . "The ghaist

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that wun hame " . . . and fresh qualms, a sort of ague of the spirit, overcame me.

But the most intolerable in its sadness and pain of all my experiences at this bitter time of my life was the last interview that I had with Moina. I cannot set that down in the terms of our speech together. If ever a man had cause to regard one event in his life as sacrosanct, this is my case in regard to my parting with Moina Jardine. I went out from her presence with my eyes darkened as though from too great a light. I had stood face to face with living holiness. That remembered radiance lightens my darkness as I write. They who have entertained an angel unawares will know my meaning. As for others, who shall describe light to a man born blind? And yet there may be some who, though they have not seen, will catch something of what I would suggest, by an effort of the inner

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eye. There is a place where Fielding, the writer, speaks of a man born blind who said that he thought that scarlet must be like the sound of a trumpet. Fielding mocks at this for phantasy. Yet to me, the blind man seemed to have grasped the fact of colour as by an intuition of the spirit. I pray all who may not comprehend what I have written here of Moina, not to mock, but to go softly, as those who tread near sorrow.

She asked and I gave her a promise. I was to return to my home. I was to come no more to hers. I was to think of her gently, and to pray for her. All these things I promised, and I sobbed and choked on the words like a child, unashamed, unhumiliated, before her great and tender wisdom.

I thought the old man would have called down some dire punishment on my head

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the day that I left Hidden House. His face was unhumanly severe, and an inner storm seemed to blast him.

“An’ ye leave me to tell Robina that ye just melted awa’ like the snaws of that day that ye trysted with her?” he demanded, with a scorn that it was hard for me to bear.

I tried to answer gently.

“No . . . tell her that there came an angel with a sword of flame between us.”

“I’ll tell her no such auld-wives’ clavers!” he roared at me. “I’ll tell her that what she took for an eagle is a moulting midden-fowl! . . . Ye to lightly Robina! . . . God! she shall make rhymes on ye that’ll set ye like a zany on the riggin’ of Time! . . . Awa’ wi’ ye! The sight o’ ye is like bacon to the sick! . . .”

I came back and was not ashamed to drag down his raging hand, and hold it, while I spoke to him.

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“Old man,” I said, “have you no pity for a young man whose heart is broken in him at the beginning of life?”

He glared upon me furiously for a moment, then put down his head upon my shoulder and wept.

“I thought I had a son! . . . I thought I had a son!” he sobbed. “But all’s bye with. . . All’s bye with. . . My life has fallen upon me like a crumbling house. . . I maun just bide in the ruins. . . .”

Then he mastered himself, and, fumbling in his coat, brought out a bit of crumpled paper. This he thrust into my hand and closed my fingers on it.

“Read it some time when ye’re your leelane,” he said. “It’ll maybe make some things clearer to ye. I found it after she had gone.”

When I was on my journey some little way, I took it out and looked at it. It was

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the manuscript of Robina's poem, "The Ghaist that Wun Hame."

If it did not make things clearer to me, it wrung my heart with pity, and set a fresh awe upon me. As she had said, it was a thing to make the blood creep backward. Here it is. It seems to me even more inexplicable and piteous after all these years have gone by. Perhaps it would strike others far differently. But, reading the story of her who wrote it, I cannot think so.

THE SANG O' THE GHAIST THAT WUN HAME

Oh, I waur hoosed ¹ like ony Queen,
Wi' curtains saft o' silken flesh;
A-through the bonny, breathin' mesh,
I keeked ² frae oot the crystal een.
My Maries ³ waur the bluid-draps bricht
That ran my errands o' delight!

(A naked ghaist hath muckle ⁴ teen.)

But frae my body I was thrawn,⁵
And shed like mist upo' the wind,
My bonny palace peaked and dwyned,⁶

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And fell to mools ⁷ ere Easter dawn:
Wha fears the lowe ⁸ o' muckle hell,
Let him fear mair what I shall tell.

(Unfleshed desire maun flit forlorn.)

I skirled ⁹ intill my mither's ear:
"Whist! 'tis the deid-chack ¹⁰ in the wa'!"
My trystit laddie I did ca';
"Hark! 'tis the wind aboot her bier!"
I clancht ¹¹ them with my hands of air,
And oh! I grat ¹² and pleaded sair!
(Unbodied teen's ¹³ a thing o' fear.)

A year o' dooms, a doom o' years,
Its lee-lane ¹⁴ flicht my wraith pursued;
Within thaur tents o' bane and bluid
The bodied-ghaists waur shut frae fears.
I couldna thole ¹⁵ thaur smirks o' glee:
I smirkled ¹⁶ as I watched them dee!
(A ghaist nae eye-holes hath for tears.)

And oh! the dear lust o' the een!
And oh! the bonny pride o' life!
What ghaist wad tak a ghaist to wife?
What spectre tryst a bogle queen?
Gie me the lips o' living red,
Tak a' for whilk ¹⁷ the martyrs bled!

(A ghaist hath never borne a wean.¹⁸)

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Then did I wi' mysel' commune:

“ A hoose o' flesh, that will I hae,
Tho a' the powers suld ¹⁹ say me nay,
And a' the priests suld pray me doon;
Young bluid shall loup ²⁰ to my desire,
Some peeri ²¹ heart be filled wi' fire.”

(Strang is a ghaist twist moon and moon.)

I found a frame that set ²² me weel,
Its hoose-wife soul was unco guid,
And mourned the ways o' flesh an' bluid;
She'd learned her bonny limbs to kneel,
But na' her bonny lips to kiss:
I took her body for my bliss.

(Turn, turn, ye faery spinning-wheel!)

Oh, waefu', waefu' was the strife!
Twa ghaists that warstled ²³ for ae flesh,
Twa mermen fechtin' ²⁴ in ae mesh,
Wi' never sound nor glint o' knife:
Ane cried to ither when 'twas o'er;
“ Go tirl ²⁵ the pin at Peter's door!

(I'll play the bonny game o' life! ”)

¹ Housed. ² Peeped. ³ A Queen's Maids of Honor were called “ Maries ” in Scotland. ⁴ Great. ⁵ Twisted. ⁶ Faded away. ⁷ The earth of graves. ⁸ Flame. ⁹ Cried. ¹⁰ Death-watch. ¹¹ Clutched. ¹² Wept. ¹³ Grief. ¹⁴ All alone. ¹⁵ Could not bear. ¹⁶ Laughed cunningly. ¹⁷ Which. ¹⁸ Child. ¹⁹ Should. ²⁰ Leap. ²¹ Puny. ²² Became me well. ²³ Wrestled. ²⁴ Fighting. ²⁵ Twirl the latch.

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Is it, after all, that I have loved two beings with an equal yet differing love? Or have I loved only two aspects of the one, only woman that life meant for me, and me alone?

Alas! I end as I began, with questions which not I, nor any other man, may answer, and toward which God keeps majestic and inviolable silence.



